

Honor Among Soldiers -By Joseph L. Galloway

If you have fed from a steady diet of Hollywood movies about Vietnam you probably believe that everyone who wore a uniform in America's long, sad involvement in war in Vietnam is some sort of a clone of Lt. William Calley---that all three million of them were drug-crazed killers and rapists who rampaged across the pastoral landscape.

Those movies got it wrong, until now. There is one more Hollywood film now playing called *We Were Soldiers* and it gets it right. Ask any Vietnam veteran who has gone to see the movie. In fact, ask any American who has gone to see it. It is based on a book I wrote with my lifelong friend Lt. Gen. (ret) Hal Moore; a book written precisely because we believed that a false impression of those soldiers had taken root in the country which sent them to war and, in the end, turned its back on both the war and the warriors.

I did four tours in Vietnam as a war correspondent for United Press International---1965-66, 1971, 1973 and 1975. In the first three of those tours at war I spent most of my time in the field with the troops and I came to know and respect them and even love them, though most folks might find the words "war" and "love" in the same sentence unsettling if not odd.

In fact, I am far more comfortable in the company of those once-young soldiers today than with any other group except my own family. They are my comrades-in-arms, the best friends of my life and if ever I were to shout "help!" they would stampede to my aid in a heartbeat. They come from all walks of life; they are black, white, Hispanic, native American, Asian; they are fiercely loyal, dead honest, entirely generous of their time and money. They are my brothers and they did none of the things Oliver Stone or Francis Ford Coppola would have you believe all of them did.

On the worst day of my life, in the middle of the worst battle of the Vietnam War, in a place called Landing Zone X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam, I was walking around snapping some photographs when I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. It was a tall, lanky GI who jumped out of a mortar pit and ran, zig-zagging under fire, toward me. He dove under the little bush I was crouched behind. "Joe! Joe Galloway! Don't you know me, man? It's Vince Cantu from Refugio, Texas!" Vince Cantu and I had graduated together from Refugio High School, Class of '59, 55 boys and girls. We embraced warmly. Then he shouted over the din of gunfire: "Joe, you got to get down and stay down. It's dangerous out here. Men are dying all around."

Vince told me that he had only ten days left on his tour of duty as a draftee soldier in the 1st Battalion 7th U.S. Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). "If I live through this I will be home in Refugio for Christmas." I asked Vince to please visit my mom and dad, but not tell them too much about where we had met and under what circumstances. I still have an old photograph from that Christmas visit---Vince wearing one of those black satin Vietnam jackets, with his daughter on his knee, sitting with my mom and dad in their living room.

Vince Cantu and I are still best friends.

When I walked out and got on a Huey helicopter leaving Landing Zone X-Ray I left knowing that 80 young Americans had laid

down their lives so that I and others might survive. Another 124 had been terribly wounded and were on their way to hospitals in Japan or the United States. I left with both a sense of my place, among them, and an obligation to tell their stories to any who would listen. I knew that I had been among men of honor and decency and courage, and anyone who believes otherwise needs to look in his own heart and weigh himself.

Hal Moore and I began our research for the book-to-be, *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*, in 1982. It was a ten-year journey to find and ultimately to bring back together as many of those who fought in LZ Xray and LZ Albany, a separate battle one day after ours only three miles away in which another 155 young Americans died and another 130 were wounded. We had good addresses for perhaps no more than a dozen veterans, but we mailed out a questionnaire to them to begin the process.

Late one night a week later my phone rang at home in Los Angeles. On the other end was Sgt. George Nye, retired and living very quietly by choice in his home state of Maine. George began talking and it was almost stream of consciousness. He had held it inside him for so long and now someone wanted to know about it. He described taking his small team of engineer demolitions men into XRay to blow down some trees and clear a safer landing zone for the helicopters. Then he was talking about PFC Jimmy D. Nakayama, one of those engineer soldiers, and how a misplaced napalm strike engulfed Nakayama in the roaring flames. How he ran out into the fire and screamed at another man to grab Jimmy's feet and help carry him to the aid station. My blood ran cold and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I had been that man on the other end of Nakayama. I had grabbed his ankles and felt the boots crumble, the skin peel, and those slick bones in my hands. Again I heard Nakayama's screams. By then we were both weeping. I knew Nakayama had died a day or two later in an Army hospital. Nye told me that Jimmy's wife had given birth to a baby girl the day he died---and that when Nye returned to base camp at An Khe he found a letter on his desk. He had encouraged Nakayama to apply for a slot at Officer Candidate School. The letter approved that application and contained orders for Nakayama to return immediately to Ft. Benning, Ga., to enter that course.

George Nye is gone now. But I want you to know what he did with the last months of his life. He lived in Bangor, Maine. The year was 1991 and in the fall plane after plane loaded with American soldiers headed home from the Persian Gulf War stopped there to refuel. It was their first sight of home. George and some other local volunteers organized a welcome at that desolate airport. They provided coffee, snacks and the warm "Welcome home, soldier" that no one ever offered George and the millions of other Vietnam veterans. George had gone out to the airport to decorate a Christmas tree for those soldiers on the day he died.

When we think of ourselves we think Shakespeare, Henry IV, Act IV, Scene 3:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother."

Honor and decency and uncommon courage were common

among these soldiers and all the soldiers who served in Vietnam. I think of how they were, on patrol, moving through jungle or rice paddies. Nervous, on edge, trying to watch right, left, ahead, behind, all at once. A friend once described it as something like looking at a tree full of owls. They were alert for sign, sound or smell of the enemy. But they also watched each other closely. At the first sign of the oppressive heat and exhaustion getting to someone the two or three guys around would relieve him of some or all of the heavy burden that the Infantryman bears: 60 or 70 pounds of stuff. Rifle and magazines. A claymore mine or two. A couple of radio batteries. Cans of C-Rations. Spare socks. Maybe a book. All that rides in the soldier's pack. They would make it easier for him to keep going. They took care of each other, because in this situation each other was all they had.

When I would pitch up to spend a day or two or three with such an outfit I was, at first, an object of some curiosity. Sooner or later a break would be called and everyone would flop down in the shade, drink some water, break out a C-Ration or a cigarette. The GI next to me would ask: What you doing out here? I would explain that I was a reporter. "You mean you are a civilian? You don't HAVE to be here?" Yes. "Man, they must pay you loads of money to do this." And I would explain that, no, unfortunately I worked for UPI, the cheapest news agency in the world. "Then you are just plain crazy, man." Once I was pigeonholed, all was all right. The grunts understood "crazy" like no one else I ever met. The welcome was warm, friendly and open. I was probably the only civilian they would ever see in the field; I was a sign that someone, anyone, outside the Big Green Machine cared how they lived and how they died.

It didn't take very long before I truly did come to care. They were, in my view, the best of their entire generation. When their number came up in the draft they didn't run and hide in Canada. They didn't turn up for their physical wearing pantyhose or full of this chemical or that drug which they hoped would fail them. Like their fathers before them they raised their right hand and took the oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. It is not their fault that the war they were sent to fight was not one that the political leadership in Washington had any intention of winning. It is not their fault that 58,200 of them died, their lives squandered because Lyndon Johnson and, later, Richard Nixon could not figure out some decent way to cut our losses and leave the Vietnamese to sort the matter out among themselves.

As I have grown older, and so have they, and first the book and now the movie have come to pass I am often asked: Doesn't this close the loop for you? Doesn't this mean you can rest easier? The answer is no, I can't. To my dying day I WILL remember and honor those who died, some in my arms. I WILL remember and honor those who lived and came home carrying memories and scars that only their brothers can share and understand.

They were the best you had, America, and you turned your back on them.

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